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LETTERS

ON

THE DRAMA.

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LETTERS

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# LETTERS ON THE DRAMA.

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## LETTER I.

### *On the Drama at Athens.*

THE invention of the drama appears generally, as well as justly, attributed to Æschylus. For, though what was called Tragedy and Comedy both existed before his time, yet to him we are indebted for dialogue, which is the chief distinction of those species of composition, according to our conception, for an immoveable stage, and for that connection of music with dramatic action, which its prevalence since, in every age and country, seems to recommend. The other Greek dramatists we know of, have not improved the form of tragedy or comedy (though Sophocles and Euripides have given to the former both ornament and variety) for it still remained, in their hands, a dialogue between persons principally interested



in the action, witnessed by a group of spectators, part of whose employment was to sing. The dialogue or speeches did not preserve the same metre through the whole work, and often varied from the iambic to a verse of a more lyric form; and, on the other hand, the songs did not confine themselves to any general subject, but sometimes alluded, in an extemporaneous manner, to what was passing before the eyes of the singer. Yet still songs were represented in the choral parts by songs, and not only dialogue, or soliloquy, by songs. Whatever degree, therefore, of merit there be in this outline of a probable plan of introducing music, not improved by his immediate successors, is due to Æschylus. The same may be said of the unities; for by the use of a chorus, the unities of time and place are allowed to have been necessary, on a principle of probability. Whether, on considering the point abstractedly, he thought music would be better united with tragedy, or approved of the latitude modern dramatic writers allow themselves in exhibiting to an audience, at one time and place, actions between which days, weeks, or months must have intervened, and which must have happened remote from each other, can-

not now be known. Those who condemn the ancient plan of tragedy as represented above, suppose the poet to have been obliged, against his will, to comply with established custom; while those who think it founded on that good sense which commands our approbation, in ancient, as well as modern works, will conceive him to have gladly seen, in the use he might make of the chorus, a means of adding the treasures of other noble arts to those of simple tragic dialogue; and to have been rejoiced that the necessity of making his characters appear consistently before witnesses, suggested to him the rules of rendering probability subservient to effect. The few instances mentioned in Mr. Twining's ingenious Notes on Aristotle, of a deviation of some of the Greek dramatists from the laws of exact imitation, by no means, I confess, convince me they thought them wrong, or that they might not have trusted to the other merits of their work for its favourable reception, in spite of poetic license. With respect too to the opinion of Aristotle, stated and commented upon likewise by another respectable critic, Mr. Pye, I cannot draw the same inference from it unfavourable to the unities, nor

think he might not, while expressing it, have approved of a closer resemblance than had yet appeared, in the imitation to the object imitated. The chorus he can hardly be thought to condemn absolutely, and at the same time praise the accompaniment of music so highly; but his doubtful opinion of the unities may be supposed, on examination of their propriety, less unfavourable to them.



## LETTER II.

*On the Difference between a minute and delicate Taste.*

THERE is a sort of disposition to attend to trifles, which argues a littleness of mind. Painting has exhibited instances of this, where an extreme finish of the parts, without much attention to proportion, or any of those animated touches which assist the general effect, constitutes the whole merit of the artist. But there are also instances of works "finished more through happiness than pains," which only denote a more enlarged comprehension, able at once to take a general and partial view of the subject, and add beauties to the rough sketch, while it preserves its complete character. It is natural, though at the same time inimical to the attainment of absolute perfection in the arts, that a nation, especially one conscious of greatness of mind, should be deceived by the resemblance between these two different qualities of a minute and delicate taste, and revolt at the idea of both of them, as one and the same.

That something of this sort is the case, in England at least, observation may perhaps convince us. But having produced literary compositions that upon the whole vie with those of any other nation whatsoever, it may less repine at the opinion of foreigners, that it has not hitherto given remarkable instances of its taste: nor may it be thought so disgraceful, that Montesquieu says, it is owing to liberty, that “its poets will more frequently have the original rudeness of invention, than that species of delicacy which is given by taste; and one will sooner find in them something approaching to the force of Michael Angelo, than to the grace of Raphael.”\*

But however impatient the mind may be of correctness or simplicity, little is gained by any new exertion that violates them; and it never is by this violation, but by other circumstances attending the exertion, that it succeeds. There is nothing noble in bombast or singularity, considered by themselves; nor does incorrectness seem a much more admirable quality. It is true, that Pope expresses the opinion contained in the following lines:

\* *Esprit des Loix*, Liv. 19. ch. 27.

"If, when the rules not far enough extend  
(Since rules were made but to promote their end)  
Some lucky license answer to the full  
The intent proposed, that license is a rule."

And it is likewise just; nor ought a rejection of beauties connected with faults to be universally recommended; but this is owing to the weakness of the mind, which has not so ready a command of beauties, as to make it prudent to run the risk of dull faultlessness, by refusing every thought that wants the stamp of perfection. This, however, ought to vary according to the degree of *talents for correction* in the writer, and also according to that of excellence in the thought; and not to countenance the establishing of a sort of rule of wrong, which is pleasing only to those who love the marvellous. Voltaire observes, in some part of his critical works, that nothing is so absurd as to sit down to write with an intention of erring against the rules of any species of writing. We may naturally err against them by the omissions of negligence or inadvertency, faults,

—— "Quas aut incuria fudit,  
Aut humana parum cavit natura;"



But to maintain it is more correct to be incorrect, is contradictory. A want of regularity is often reasoned upon in drawing or painting, as a mark of genius, but that it is justly in any art, may not be altogether evident. It is known that the ancient statuaries, who were perhaps the greatest and most unrivalled artists who have existed in any line, did not scruple to adhere to a system very observable in their remaining works, and which oftener exhibited the appearance of too much than of too little art: so that where there is merit, its supposed resemblance, in incorrectness, is unnecessary. The determined neglect of any approved though inferior quality also of painting, is not now customary; and though the artist's principal object be to imitate the outline of Raphael, the colouring of Titian, and the *claro scuro* of Corregio, he will not think it beneath him to improve himself by paying some attention to that less admirable art possessed by Lanfranc and Pietro di Cortona, of disposing his figures in a picturesque and attractive manner. The able author of the *Sublime and Beautiful* has the following passages:

“As many of the works of imagination are not confined to the representation of sensible objects,

nor to efforts upon the passions, but extend themselves to the manners, the characters, the actions, and designs of men, their relations, their virtues, and their vices, they come within the province of the judgment, which is improved by attention, and by the habit of reasoning. All these make a very considerable part of what are considered as the objects of taste; and Horace sends us to the schools of philosophy, and the world, for our instruction in them. Whatever certainty is to be acquired in morality and the science of life; just the same degree of certainty have we in what relates to them in works of imitation. Indeed it is for the most part in our skill in manners, and in the *observances of time and place, and of decency in general*, which is only to be learned in these schools to which Horace recommends us, that what *is called taste by way of distinction, consists.*"

The following words too, a little below, are to the same effect:—

"So far as the imagination and the passions are concerned, I believe it true, that the reason is little consulted; but where disposition, where decorum, where congruity are concerned, in short, wherever the best taste differs from the worst," &c.

From these passages the value of that taste will be judged of, which is employed in estimating those parts of a composition which do not act so immediately upon the passions, and also of that art which is their character.

The judgment which is made by the habit of reasoning, and by the habit of taste, is a very considerable part of what are considered as the objects of taste; and Horace sends us to the schools of philosophy, and the world for our instruction in them. Whatever certainly is to be acquired in morality and the science of life; just the same degree of certainty have we in what relates to them in works of imagination. Indeed it is for the most part in our skill in ornaments, and in the ornaments of time and place, and of decency in general, which is only to be learned in those schools to which Horace recommends us, that what is called taste by a way of distinction, consists.

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“So far as the imagination and the passions are concerned, I believe it true, that the reason is little consulted; but where disquisitions, where decorum, where congruity are concerned, in short, where the best taste differs from the worst.”



## LETTER III.

*Of the true Principle of Dramatic Taste.*

WHEN an orator is addressing himself to an audience composed of persons of rank and education, he often rests his arguments upon political axioms, and draws inferences for their conviction, which would not easily be understood by persons whose minds were uninformed. When he wishes to acquire the favour of the people, and harangues a mixed multitude with that intent, he has less of abstract reasoning, and references to such proofs of the justice of his cause as are not familiar to all around him; and attains his end oftener by some declamatory allusion to their rights in general, or other appeal to their passions. Yet at the same time, he does not find it necessary to speak ungrammatically, or to adopt the faulty dialect or vulgar expressions used by one of the common people, though such a person might prevail more with his hearers than he would have done in speaking as he did in the senate. Upon this principle ought the dramatic writer to pro-

ceed; and the superior difficulty of pleasing the illiterate as well as the informed, helps very much to render tragic a rival to epic poetry, in dignity. Its perfection seems to be to gratify the most fastidious scholar by the closest adherence to dramatic rules, and at the same time to indulge the most ignorant frequenter of sights by whatever may strike the eye or the ear. Some people think this latter derogatory from the character of tragedy; but it is very possible to render stage effect respectable by its artful and striking use. The supposed difficulty of uniting the opinions of so many in our favour, deters us from attempting it; and yet, surely, a less time than the usually allotted space of nine years, seems amply sufficient for the undertaking.

People may err in their judgments of a dramatic work, by not sufficiently considering the two different characters it is meant to unite, of a literary performance, and of a spectacle. There is nothing extraordinary or improper, that those who only understand it as a spectacle, should condemn it upon the whole, and they are perhaps the greatest part of its judges. It is different with other literary works, which are, comparatively

speaking, all understood by their judges. Yet it does not follow that a play which is well received, must be more valuable than one which is condemned; nor, indeed, that any thing which is a beauty in another work, such as the scene of the grave-diggers in Shakspeare, and the cypress-tree mentioned by Horace, should not be valuable when separately considered.

It has been sometimes held, that an Athenian audience must have possessed extraordinary judgment in matters of taste, and much superior to an English one. Yet I cannot, for my part, think there can be much difference between audiences in the degree of their taste. If the simple arrangement of the story be thought a proof of it, I object to it for two reasons: first, that at the time of the Greek tragic writers, an audience had no experience of the charms of stage effect, as it is produced on our theatre. Secondly; there must have been a species of stage effect produced by the pomp and strangeness of the spectacle, which perhaps made it unnecessary; and instead of the probability of the *literary work*, it was perhaps the improbability, or at least the glare and pageantry, of the *spectacle*, that recommended the ancient



tragedies to the greater part of an audience, and satisfied them, without recourse being had to the variety of vicious taste.

Another mode of pleasing might have been by moral and political reflections. We know how, at our theatres, the very tone of the most sentimental morality is secure of applause from the well-meaning audience. Always allowing the first place to pathos in a tragedy, and to manners in a comedy, there seems no reason why we should reject any means consistent with correct composition, of interesting an audience. I cannot, for this reason, subscribe to the opinion of Gibbon, in his entertaining posthumous works just published, who allows no advantage to be taken of so fertile a source of pleasure as that of farce.

When Addison wrote against some of the stage tricks common in those days, he thought himself serving the cause of regular composition; but it was quite the reverse. They would have helped out the tragedy of Cato much better than his love scenes. It is equally certain that they would not have been worse.

## LETTER IV.

*Of poetical Probability.*

THERE are various ways, more or less absurd, according to the opinions of critics, in which poets may violate the laws of probability. Of the Bard of Gray, there appear to be some who reason in the following manner.—Though Johnson resembles Rhymer in his condemnation of the great poet he criticises, he resembles him also in the justness of his remarks; and however inferior the “Prophecy of Nereus” be, upon the whole, to “the Bard,” it is superior in point of probability. To imagine the god Nereus to prophecy, was a natural conception, and calculated instantly to attract the mind of those who allowed such a divinity; and though Horace should not have given credit to the possibility of it, yet, by a sympathy which daily discourse furnishes instances of, he might be supposed for a moment to adopt the tastes and opinions of those among whom he lived, and whom he wished to amuse. This was a natural operation of the mind, and nature is always

pleasing. But the author of "the Bard," not only supposed to exist what neither he nor any other living person could think possible (for he professed a far more jealous\* religion than Horace); but did not, as Johnson observes, adhere accurately to the creed of those whose superstition he feigned to believe. Hence, as far as the magic of his style permits us, we express disapprobation of *the idea* of "the Bard" as more strained and far-fetched than "the Prophecy of Nereus."

When this sort of improbability is in the drama, it is one degree better; for the poet does not absolutely, in his own words, assert his belief in the fiction. So that one may imagine he meant to represent the ideas of another person. In the *Phædre* of Racine, where Hyppolite loses his life in consequence of the prayer of Theseus to Neptune, it will occur, that though a Pagan poet believed in the divinity and power of Neptune, a Christian could not. Yet, as Racine did not affirm any thing himself, but made his characters tell their own story, there is less improbability in this; though, in a regular drama, even this degree of remoteness from truth is too much felt. It might,

\* See Gibbon, Vol. i. page 35, quarto edition.



however, be allowed in such a composition as a masque or pantomime, in which all the wonders of Harlequin might, to the literary spectator, be exhibited by a Medea, or an Armida; for, to the philosopher himself, the opinions, and even errors, of mankind, in different ages and countries, are a curious subject of contemplation.

Pope's machinery of the Sylphs and Gnomes, is, I think, the most admirable instance existing of poetical probability. It is not a mere negative merit, but has a positive effect; and there is an infinite beauty in the archness of the poet's intention. Had either everybody, or nobody believed in those familiar spirits, the fiction would have wanted spirit, and the contrast of weak faith in himself, and the "doubting wit" with the credulity of the "fair and innocent," would not have given force to the satire, or equal beauty to the composition. Owing to the inferior aptitude, at the present day, of this machinery, the use of it seems improper; though it does not seem at all contrary to probability, to imagine new spirits consistent with prevailing notions.

But it is not only the violation of historical truth that is said to transgress probability; but in

general whatever is not imagined either necessarily, or naturally, is said more or less to err against it. It is held by some (for instance), that the characters who appear at the first scene should act throughout a play, as if they remained in the same place, and be supposed to complete the action in the same time that they appear to do. Johnson, however, thinks it does not, but that a change of scene may be made, and the action continued at a time somewhat remote; arguing, that when this change is made, it is no more difficult to imagine the second place represented, than the first. But this is at least certain, that supposing us to transport ourselves in imagination to the first, it is possible for us to conceive the absurdity of any place's being, at once, the same and different, whatever force there be in this idea. It is not less improbable, that the time and place should be varied between the acts; for we, in a manner, see through the curtain, just as the ancients did through the drapery with which Timanthes, in his picture, covered the head of Agamemnon; and every thing, both what may be behind the curtain, and what appears when it is drawn up, conspires to form one connected whole. Lord Kaimes does not ad-

vert to this, where he says, "after an interval, the imagination readily adapts itself to any place that is necessary, as readily as at the commencement of the play." These unities of time and place are the only ones that have to do with probability.

The action's passing before witnesses, is thought, by those who favour the chorus, to be more probable, and, I think, in one sense, justly: however, I in general approve of the dramatic opinions of the judicious Bishop Hurd, I do not go so far as to think it indispensably, or in such a manner probable, that its not doing so could shock us as absurd; it would only have a feebler effect upon the mind, by not being marked with an additional characteristic circumstance, namely, its power of producing such and such sensations in the minds of stage spectators.

An effect of want of animation has been pointed out by Mr. Pye in the moral interference of the chorus, which is only an error against probability, and the cause being removed, the effect ceases. The remarks upon this, that "it is the horror shewn by the physician and attendant, during Lady Macbeth's dream, and the indignation of Faulconbridge at Hubert, as the supposed murderer



of Arthur, that resemble the two horses in Le Brun's picture." Now this is the very object of a chorus, to form precisely such situations as are here mentioned. A chorus ought to moralize, but not in a more improbable manner, than Faulconbridge does here, or than Henry the Sixth does at the death of Cardinal Beaufort. If it should be doubtful, whether morality be not too frequently inculcated by the fair chorus of Elfrida, yet in *Caractacus*, Mr. Mason has made ample amends; for every moral sentence, pronounced by a priest, contributes to his priestly dignity; and Mr. Mason's art in managing this, leaves us nothing to desire. Probability here has not only a negative effect, but also gives force to character.

I own I equally approve of the character of the *Coryphæa* in *Elfrida*, compared with that of the *confidante*, which the author observes he might have chosen. The chorus ought no more to be considered as a group of important characters, than the lords, gentlemen, servants, &c. of *Shakespeare*, whose number, however great, never shocks us. We consider them as in the back ground, and they are distinguished, as men, by no peculiar character; which, I think, I may say, is

the case of the ancient Coryphæi. Besides, if we compare the characters, with how much more probability are domestics found at the house of a great person than even a near relation? Many may be without such particular relations, but none can be unattended; besides, that a shew of dependants marks their situation in society with greater truth; add too, that the appearance of these attendants in *Elfrida* improves the costume, and with truer colours represents the manners of the age.

Upon the whole, I think the claim just, of at least equal probability, both in the unities and the chorus. With respect to the former, it appears from the very eloquence used to contest it. In the commentary on Aristotle it is observed, that "this rule of natural unity has nothing to do with the most striking flights of improbability. If a writer puts his hero on a magic courser, that can

" Put a girdle round about the earth  
In forty minutes,"——

it is no offence against this rule." But were this liberty of the dramatic writer capable of being

justified as natural, it would have been so by a metaphor not representing a preternatural action.

It is remarkable, that the instances here given of violation of the rules of natural unity is taken not from those plays which have strictly adhered to the regular unities, but from the tragedy of King Lear; and it may be observed too of the chorus, that only *some* of the Greek plays have furnished instances of improbability, occasioned by its introduction: whereas, in finally condemning a species of composition, we ought at least to have it proved to us, that it never has succeeded, as we undertake to pronounce, that it never can. I am at a loss, indeed, for a reason, why, in all other works, even ideal probability should be either a beauty, or no defect; but that we should stop short of this point in the drama.



## LETTER V.

*On the supposed Deception of the Drama.*

I OWE to my perusal of the commentary\* my idea of theatrical deception. The skilful development of the plot, the effect of theatrical spectators, as exhibited in the chorus, and that perspicuity, which I shall speak more of, resulting from the unities of place and time, and owing to the equal connection of all the parts of regular tragedy, seem to produce a more vivid conception of the event passing before our eyes, mistaken, I imagine, for that belief, which it would naturally accompany. The more there is of this vivid conception so produced, and unattended by belief, the more pleasure do we derive from tragedy. I do not mean to dispute Mr. Burke's idea of our taking† pleasure in real calamity; but a stage representation is an exception to this rule. It must be said in favour of the unities, that this effect

\* Pages 116, 117.

† Sublime and Beautiful.

never has been attributed to them, and, therefore, so far we may go, not only with safety, but with profit. But proceeding farther, if we write tragedy in prose, and exhibit the manners of our own times, we shall produce an effect resembling that of painted statues, and approach too near to deception to obtain our purpose. But till probability is carried to this length, it is always reasoned upon as an advantage.

Mr. Pye justly mentions the exalted personages of tragedy as one circumstance preventing this deception; from which might be inferred the use of what is called the royal tragedy, the characters of which certainly attract by importance, (a very general source of pleasure in poetry!) and which is the most calculated to avail itself of the opportunity peculiar to the drama, among literary performances, of striking the eyes. For the object of tragedy is not only to affect, but to interest, or, in other words, to affect in the most pleasing manner.

## LETTER VI.

*On the Material of Imitation.*

FROM what I have said of the propriety of the closest imitation that does not go so far as to produce deception, will follow the propriety of our using prose in comedy, and blank verse in tragedy. In comedy, the imitation is perfect; in tragedy, it is as nearly so, as it well can be. To imitate the manners of remote ages is now impossible, and, were it not, the object would be to divert the attention from manners to actions. The pomp of blank verse (which we can better conceive the language of all ages and nations) is calculated for this distinction, at the same time that it is that verse, the liberty of which most resembles conversation. Other nations have imitated with less simplicity: the Greeks sacrificed exactness in this respect to the custom of disguising the human figure by stage dresses, and to the use of the dance during the representation. The Italians, in their operas, sing their parts; and the French, in their tragedies, and principal comedies, use rhyme.—



These customs we object to, as unnatural, according to that usual disposition in man, from which arises the wish of destroying, or altering, by a standard of abstract excellence. But in this, as in many things, practice is at war with theory, and those who are most conversant with foreign and ancient works of this sort, can best conceive, how they do not revolt, by what we think absurdity, the natives of those countries for whose amusement they were designed. We may rejoice that our literature, in this respect, like our government, is founded in reason, without desiring that other nations should suffer inconvenience by an hazardous attempt to resemble us.

Metastasio observes, that "an imitator, who does not undertake to produce the exact truth, but only to give as great a likeness as possible to the material he employs, has perfectly fulfilled his promise, and attained his end, when he has given it every thing of which his materials are capable—and that it is from ignorance of this nature of imitation, that arises the contemptuous judgment of those, who treat the musical drama as improbable and absurd, because the actors die with a song in their mouth." On this subject, however, we

might more easily agree with him, if the same relation were preserved in the materials as in the objects of imitation. For instance, did the opera not vary more in the poetry and the music, than just in proportion to the temper of mind of the speaker, and did they just in the proper degree heighten or enforce every passion, a refined taste need not be hurt at the present want of truth perceived in the relation between the different materials of imitation. In that case, what advantage there may be in music for the expression of sentiments in a more delightful manner, would go much farther towards compensating for the defects of a less natural mode of imitation. At present there are only two dissimilar vehicles for sentiment; blank verse, united with recitative, and lyric poetry, set to a much more varied music; and to these two all the passions must adapt themselves. We see here the advantage of the Greek chorus, even as it was rudely designed by Æschylus. They are not characters whose singing is merely an imitation of discourse, but who represent singers; and therefore have nothing in them, in this respect, that we can think unnatural. Discourse and song are divided in reality, and

they are therefore properly in imitation. It must be owned, there is not in the colloquial parts of the Greek drama the same uniformity that there is in discourse. Dr. Francklin, indeed, the translator of Sophocles, approves of this very fault, on the principle of variety; and Metastasio, unable to defend it by appealing to reason, appeals thus to the example of the ancients, in his letter to the Duke of Chattellux.\* “You have before learnedly observed, Sir, that the primitive fathers of tragedy, in order to furnish music with opportunities for displaying its beauties, and to vary the expression, sometimes changed in the mouths of the characters the usual iambics into anapæsts and trochees; nor has it escaped you, that the personages themselves sung alone, with each other, and in dialogue, with the chorus, strophes, antistrophes, and epodes; measures which naturally require that species of music which we now apply to air; and which you, in a masterly manner, have called periodical: hence, by a necessary consequence, you will conclude, that in flattering the effeminate ears of the audience with arietti, we have doubtless illustrious ancient and great autho-

\* Burney's *Life of Metastasio*, vol. II. p. 323.



rity, both for air and recitative." But the songs of the ancient plan of drama, are perfectly natural, supposing, in the first place, they are premeditated; and, in the second, that the leader of the band indicates the song either by beginning to sing what they are supposed to know, or by proposing it, as the Druid calls upon his brethren, in Caractacus, to chant "the prelude of the famed solemnity:" or else that some principal character should call for the song, as in the play of Esther, where she says,

" Mes filles, chantez nous quelqu'un de ces  
cantiques,  
Où vos voix, si souvent se melant à nos pleurs,  
De la triste Sion celebrent les malheurs."

This designation of a particular song is made first, I believe, by Racine. Mr. Mason has, with judgment, imitated him in this, but has himself made a real improvement in this best sort of tragedy, by effecting the true division of it into *chorus* and *iambic*, according to Milton's happy definition. The principal characters, in his plays, never quit the iambic metre; though they do, I fancy, in *every one* of the Greek tragedies, as well as Racine. We may form a judgment of the idea the

Italians have of the nature of operas, by the opinion of one\* of their critics; who objects to the custom of making similies, or thoughts marked with simple fancy, the subject of airs, and says, that only the more impassioned sentiments of the piece are proper for them. However music and metre should be capable of imitating truly, by their power real or supposed, of expressing passion in its different degrees, it will be impossible to preserve a due relation between the part of the work in which blank verse is united with prose: for while the principal characters are elevated above nature, the rest will remain upon a level with it; as there is no way of varying or modifying prose. A fault is remarked, by Mr. Pye, in Thomson's *Tancred and Sigismunda*, where a letter is read in prose. Yet still, though by prose the material *may seem* avowed, there is a natural reason for changing the material, which must have influenced Thomson. The French poets, in this case, use sonnet metre, and Shakspeare likewise, though certainly without much deep reflection upon its fitness for tragedy, has used rhyme. But in the tragi-comedy, where the act does not

\* Planelli, dell' Opera in Musica, page 83.

vary from speaking to writing, still the material varies from poetry to prose, and a false relation is produced between the parts of the work, that transgresses poetical probability. Nor is there excuse for this, if we consider the power blank verse has, by rejecting variety of pauses, as in the scene where Antony harangues the mob, of expressing the simplest notions of the meanest citizen.



## LETTER VII.

*Of the Chorus.*

HAVING now at large considered the subject of poetical probability, I shall not dwell any longer upon it, and confine myself chiefly, or wholly to others, both in treating of the other parts of the drama, and the chorus; which I shall next speak of, as being the parent, no less than the mate, of tragedy; though I hope you will find that it is neither, like Sin in Milton, monstrous in itself, nor has formed a disadvantageous union; nor, finally, has produced an unsightly and inharmonious brood, whose existence there may be cause to regret.

Before we attempt to reason upon the propriety of a chorus, it seems necessary to define it with accuracy, and to determine precisely what we mean by it. Colman, in his notes on the Epistle "ad Pisones," observes, that if we attempt to revive the chorus, we ought, in order to do it thoroughly, to revive the dance, as well as the song. I might add, that we ought to compose in Greek; nay, celebrate

the rites of Bacchus. But this is not enjoined by the generality of those critics who have written against the chorus; I wish no more than to abide by their idea of its character, while they condemn it. Now all, or most of them, have, I believe, written since the first appearance of the *Esther* and *Athalie* of Racine, and none of them have objected to the ancienry of that style of drama, nor said, that it is not according to the manner of the Greek tragedies, with a chorus. Their silence upon the subject justifies our opinion, that they allow those plays to be, *essentially*, of that kind. But why then is the constant presence of the chorus mentioned as if insisted upon, it not being to be found in those plays? I do not say that, however difficult, a fine tragedy may not be written, with perfect propriety, and the constant presence of the chorus take place; but I think the contrast arising from its occasional absence, makes sufficient amends for its usual effect of producing a more vivid conception of what passes; or rather, produces the same effect in another way.

I shall proceed to consider those advantages of the chorus which I have not yet touched upon, and our evident acknowledgment of those very

advantages, in the construction of a modern tragedy, will easily appear.

First. With respect to its moral effect, it may be asked, what is the peculiar advantage of the chorus, if all the characters of the play ought \* to make no moral remarks but what are probable? To this I answer, that the Coriphæus may be relied on for them more than any single character, (though not so much as the whole number of them,) and for this reason, he is of a rank which are the lookers on, and censors in society, and will be more employed in giving opinions of actions, than in acting themselves. The moral effect of a chorus might perhaps be produced, in comedy, most frequently by the servants of a house; and the spirit of farce, cautiously admitted, instead of seeming heterogeneous, might have a peculiar force confined to those characters. Now, both in comedy and tragedy, do not we already make a similar use of such inferior characters?

Secondly. As to its effect in improving the spectacle. Both variety and dignity are given to the group by a chorus; and this likewise the moderns obtain by the mixture of high and low cha-

\* See page 23.



racters, especially in what is called royal tragedy. In speaking of this subject, the *Œdipe* of Voltaire naturally occurs. It is a curious attempt of one who is prejudiced against the other advantages of the chorus, to render the spectacle, by means of it, more picturesque.

Thirdly. With respect to its songs. I shall consider, first, whether they take from the effect of the drama; and, secondly, what degree of advantage they confer upon it.

If the introduction of music into tragedy do, indeed, interrupt the course of events, so as to diminish the interest, as is supposed by many, there is no doubt it ought not to be admitted. But there are some parts of a tragedy, perhaps, where it may be safely pronounced beforehand, that it cannot happen. Towards the beginning, for instance, where the attention is not yet, or is hardly awakened; or at the end, particularly after the catastrophe, where the joy or sorrow wants to be completely expressed, might not music aptly be introduced? But if I were to say, there is an English play with chorusses confined to the *intermediate* parts, which was thought to derive acknowledged advantage from them by a critic, not by any means

of the ancient school, it would surprise. And yet, if we judge rather by things than names, we shall find that the tragedy of Theodosius is such a play, and that the following is part of a critique of it, given in Baker's *Biographia Dramatica*. "It is also *assisted* in the representation by several entertainments of singing in the solemnity of church music, composed by the celebrated Henry Purcell, being the first he ever composed for the stage." But those who attend the theatres, need not inquire elsewhere the degree of pleasure a British audience can receive from theatrical music. I do not know whether the French could revive the chorus, but am persuaded that the English might; nor can I think that the great mediocrity of the songs in Theodosius, for instance, when compared with the chorusses of Sophocles, gives the author of the former any advantage. Athenian sublimity, and even obscurity, would, no less than even Grub-street fatuity, be put out of view, to most people, by the pleasing interruption of the accompaniment.

This justification of the introduction of chorusses, suggests a reason why we should *embody* those inferior characters, always necessary, and

form of them a regular chorus; or at least, that if we chose to separate the offices, we should have a distinct body for this purpose only.

But this custom does not only deserve justification, as not taking from the effect of tragedy, but preference, as improving it, and forming not only a different, but a better species of it. The advantages I have considered appear nothing in comparison of that which I shall now speak of; I mean the power which belongs to the chorus, of delighting by the means of music and lyric poetry. I have often wondered that critics and academicians have dwelt so little upon this quality of the chorus in tragedy, when they might have seen in Racine's *Esther* and *Athalie* that it was considered by him as the principal, and almost only material one. It is by means of this alone that it can at all rival epic poetry as a literary work. The two species of composition have been compared very justly by Mr. Pye, and their merits as justly determined, upon taking into consideration only the dramatic parts of tragedy. But let us consider the idea Aristotle had of it, as connected with the greater ode, a species of writing that hardly yields to any. Suppose that *Othello* or *Macbeth* had, naturally



introduced in them, odes such as Dryden's Alexander's feast, which alone is allowed to have merit capable of immortalizing an author; or suppose that all the odes of Gray, on which was founded his claim to a cenotaph in Westminster Abbey, which are not more than sufficient, made part of a single choral tragedy, would the work exhibit less variety of talents? Epic poetry, perhaps, may exhibit more variety of talents, but it does not talents so extremely opposite, as those fitted for dramatic dialogue, in which *words* are extremely subservient to *things*, and those adapted to the ode, in which glowing expression is almost exclusively the object: for eloquence in this art is cultivated more purely than in any; being neither confined to truth of fact, as at the bar, or in the senate; not interrupted by the attention necessary either for narration, or even elaborate disposition and arrangement; while it borrows assistance, at least as much as any, from that elevation of phrase which is peculiar to poetry. Mr. Pye says, "the epopee depends more on itself; the poet is at the same time, poet, actor, and manager." But it seems to me this is the case, or at least ought to be, no less in tragedy. The writer ought to con-

ceive clearly the mode in which the actors are to deliver his sentiments, and as far as possible indicate it by a note. He ought too to make himself master, as much as possible, of the means of striking by the scenery, and study the full effect of it; otherwise he will find it difficult to amuse the galleries, while he preserves the unities. Now this, instead of being easy, shews more opposite talents than what the epic has to do, because of the want of connection between the three talents here; whereas the epic poet, using the same verse, and mode of exhibiting his representations, is led naturally from one to the other of these employments. They are all habitual to him *as a literary man*. I do not, however, pretend to argue that of two compositions, one of which shall be an epic poem, and the other a choral tragedy, executed in the same manner, the former may not be a greater work. The latter, however, as an admirable invention, adapted to the nature of man, does not seem to yield to it. "The production of a drama," says Metastasio, "in which all the fine arts concur, is an extreme difficult enterprize." Let us consider how many of those elegant arts which are (for the most part) the pride of genius, and which there

must always be so great a demand for in a populous and civilized country, were united for the entertainment of an Athenian audience. In the dialogue was the art of exciting pity and terror; in the odes, that of pleasing by the happiest union of enthusiastic language and metre, as well as the art of music and of dancing; in the building where they sate, architecture; in the decorations of the building, sculpture; on the stage, as in the scene, painting, and the histrionic art. Dancing however, was introduced in a manner that must have taken from the faithfulness of the imitation, and to which nothing but inveterate custom could have reconciled the audience. It has never yet appeared to have been the subject of contemplation, whether a more probable kind of dance, that would accord with the manners of the time and place where the event happened, might not be cautiously introduced, by favour of that obscurity in remote history, which as Gray justly observes, "gives an unbounded liberty to pure imagination and fiction."\* Perhaps this art may be dispensed with in tragedy; but how friendly is the obscurity here mentioned to the probable in-

\* Memoirs, Section 4th. Letter 27th.



introduction of a band of singers; and how much more now than in the time of the Greeks, whose own annals were so simple, and who had not such a choice of stories, just sufficiently dark for the poet, in the annals of other countries! Voltaire, with a mind far more harmonized by the arts than his anarchical scholars, was however too fastidious in his ideas of propriety, in what regarded his favourite, tragedy, to allow of this beautiful assemblage of sister arts. He disapproves, as was observed, of the use of a chorus, and he considers that degree of ornament, which was seen in an ancient theatre, as vain and ostentatious. Yet whether sculpture, if admissible, would be worse calculated than painting to please by candlelight, will be determined by those who, like us, have seen the Apollo de Belvidere with torches.

## LETTER VIII.

*Of the Unities.*

THE Unities of place and time, are the only ones that are peculiar to the drama, and have divided critics into two parties, those who condemn, and who approve of them. How far they are necessary to the drama on the score of probability, I have considered in a former letter, and I now therefore shall consider them in other respects.

Instead of examining whether the unities of time and place are necessary, we ought first to inquire what reason there is to violate them. A poet, we will say, begins a tragedy, and writes the first act without having introduced any change of place, or prolonged the time: arrived at that point, he finds it convenient to do so, and according to his reasons, I approve or condemn him. If he say, either that he is obliged before a certain day to furnish a piece for the theatre, or that he has such natural impatience and want of talents for correct composition, that he cannot write by rule, without spoiling the work he has undertaken, the

utmost poetical license ought to be allowed him, and he ought to be completely indifferent to the cavils of French dogmatism. But if he wish to represent all farther attempts at perfection as useless, and complain that without extending the time, he cannot combine into one piece two events related in history; I would ask him, why he does not look into *the annals of imagination*, and find there every possible situation that may serve his purpose? If he be not either one of the few, whom skill or patience enables to search those volumes, let him not rashly question the existence of what they contain. Suppose one writing bad poetry were to say gravely, in excuse for it, that it was too difficult to produce expressive and harmonious language; would it be thought sufficient?

It will not, surely, be held that the time, which elapses in a play, over and above that of the representation, and when the characters are off the stage, can excite the passions by the force of mere duration.

Eternity is certainly a sublime idea, but no portion of time, however extended, affects us in the same manner, nor has it ever entered into the head of a dramatic poet to rival Shakspeare, by



representing in his tragedy a series of events, which should reach down from the creation to the present time. Thus neither are these unities always adverse to providing subject matter for a work, nor do they of themselves deduct any thing from the force and effect of it; on the contrary, would not these breaks very improperly intrude in the middle of an impassioned scene? or, at least, would the interruption they cause, very much increase the interest? Gravina,\* a critic of cautious taste, and one who adhered very closely to Aristotle, thought, however, four-and-twenty hours preferable to a shorter time, for the duration of the fable; because, he says, a great event must necessarily take up so much time. But when the pleasure, arising from reflection on a story, is substituted for the emotion produced by a succession of interesting actions, tragedy may attract; but it is on the principle of the epopee; for though the fable be valuable for its importance, its power of acting upon the passions ought to be its principal merit. That such was the character of tragedy, was conceived by its great inventor, who considered his poems as

\* Della Tragedia, cap. 6.

"single dishes taken from the great feast of Homer." Aristotle does not expressly, indeed, say that the time of the representation is the best for the duration of the fable, and he even makes a distinction between them; but I do not collect from what he says of a fable's being better as it is larger, provided it be perspicuous, he means any degree of perspicuity should be sacrificed for its extension; and extreme perspicuity is only to be had by a strict adherence to the unities of time and place. Where they are, observed there is a perpetual key to the story; the mind no longer having occasion to enter into itself to develop any part of it. Thus if perspicuity be a quality of the least value in composition, these unities are not, as Johnson represents them, superfluous, or rather a blemish, such as would be "the introduction of all the orders into a citadel, when the principal beauty of a citadel is to exclude the enemy:" a simile illustrating *simplicity* by an example of its opposite, *ornament*. Though not indispensable for pleasing, they are in themselves calculated to add to pleasure; not to mention in their praise the exclusive privilege they give the drama, of being regulated by precise invariable

rules, drawn from the nature of things. To wish a mind like Metastasio's, should be under that restraint, in composition, he held to be attached to the observation of the unities, would be pedantic; to condemn Shakspeare on account of his transgression of them, would be no less so: but ought therefore the advantages of regularity to be undervalued? or does it not rather seem peculiarly characteristic of a polished age? As to change of scene, it only pleases because it is variety; and if variety be produced by other means, it is useless. Yet it is certain that as lights and shades in any place may vary during the course of hours, any place may exhibit, during that time, a different appearance; and accordingly, I have heard an artist in the line of landscape-painting say, he thought an effect adequate to change of place might be obtained by merely exhibiting the same objects, at different times of the day. Still greater would be the difference of day and night, or some accidental change in *the scene*, without changing *the place*, as in the *Athalie* of Racine. But it is not the unlettered part of an audience (which judges as well as its degree of information permits) nor yet those learned critics, who cautiously



dissent from him, that the regular writer finds so very difficult to content: it is only those admirers of system, who in prologues, newspapers, &c. zealously write down any attempt to please, according to a different model from that which they have determined is best; who, finding the drama either allows or requires a freer measure, do not scruple to reckon harmony a fault; and who want no other reason to condemn a piece than its adhering, more strictly than usual, to the laws of good sense, and, of course, departing from what they mistake for English energy. Lettered critics are of two sorts, one of which may be said to judge *according* to rule, and the other *by* rule. The first when they form their judgment of a work, have already qualified their minds for the task by knowledge of the rule, but now dismiss all thoughts of it, and are influenced solely by feeling; the latter, being destitute of feeling, have nothing to direct them but the rule, from which they cannot depart. Their inability of doing justice to merit discourages it improperly, even when it acknowledges error, but still more when it professes to exhibit a nearer approach to perfection.

Upon the whole, it is to be wished that poets

would adopt that form of composition, which they feel gives them liberty to write in the happiest mood. But still one form may be better than another, and it may possibly happen, in process of time, that dramatic effect may be so well understood, that we shall wonder at the necessity now supposed, of transgressing rules.

Unity of action has, I believe, been allowed by most critics to be founded in reason. There is not the same difference of opinion in respect to this, as to the unities of time and place, between the English critics on the one hand, and those of all former times, and almost all foreign countries on the other. That a fable should be one, and the events, though happening at different times, and different places, should be equally connected with each other, and subordinate only to one principal one, is by no means an unfashionable opinion, especially among enlightened critics. Aristotle may be easily supposed to entertain it, and he has considered the subject in that part of his poetics, where he compares a just fable to an animal, neither too large to be taken in by the eye at one view, nor too small to attract the attention.

## LETTER IX.

*On Tragi-comedy.*

THE new commentary on Aristotle, has some very just criticism upon tragi-comedy. Mr. Pye disapproves not only of the regular tragi-comedy, as being contrary to the rule I last mentioned, by its double plot, but condemns the union of comic and tragic scenes, even in a single plot. The monthly Reviewers seem not to notice the distinction made by him between the tragi-comic plays of Shakspeare, and those of Dryden and Otway, and, as far as I understand them, approve of both species; Mr. Pye's opinion of this matter seems, in both instances, founded on the same principle; for even in the case of a single plot, unity of action, especially in compositions not more extended than a drama, appears impracticable without unity of character; and when the action becomes comic, it is no longer the same. If indeed the comic parts are decidedly subordinate, as in some Greek tragedies, and Homer's *Iliad*, it offends much less. A nobleman, whose elegant



pen confers literary consequence on those fine arts, which are not literary, and lends a charm to the dry study of the antiquary, has also successfully attempted a work of fiction, in the *Castle of Otranto*; but the rule recommended by precept in the preface, and by example in the tale, may not universally seem proper. It may be thought perhaps that in the scene of the grave diggers, a fault has been committed; but one of Shakspeare's faults, and, as usual, more valuable than the careful composition of another author: that a distinction may be made between that and the scene where Antony and Brutus harangue the mob, whose language is surely "vested in heroics," and errs little against rule; and that whatever the merit of the former scene, *when considered by itself*, it acts more forcibly, and to a worse effect on the *whole* composition, than the comic parts of the *Castle of Otranto*; first, because it is more comic, and more extended, and, secondly, because the march of the drama is more rapid, and prevents its glancing, like the epopee, at objects not pressing upon its attention; though such interlocutors as are here recommended may, in this original example, have produced a good effect,

as well as in any later work, in imitation of it; yet one may possibly foresee that their blunders cannot furnish inexhaustible means of giving dignity to a work, nor tend very powerfully to enliven it.

Tragi-comedy has been sometimes of late defended as being a more natural picture of human life; in which happiness and misfortune appear alternately. But tragedy and comedy likewise aspire to the praise of being pictures of human life: how therefore shall we determine their comparative claims? I think in the following manner: comedy is a picture of human life as it is every day: tragedy is so during those great events which operate powerfully upon our conduct: but tragi-comedy shews the general rule observed in the former, unnaturally jumbled, with the exception instanced in the latter. It is said, that the exception proves the rule; but that is, when they are argued upon as of opposite natures, and not as of the same nature. In tragedy the passions shine immediately and forcibly; in comedy, by giving lustre to the manners; but in tragi-comedy, where the direct influence of the passions is looked for, and yet the manners appear, the con-

sequence is unavoidable, that their effect must be weakened, and their splendour be obscured.

It is true, I confess, that what is most material to please an audience, is that which is exhibited at a single point of time; so that were there a succession of stage tricks and buffooneries, through a piece, with but a decent degree of connection between them, it would content them; and upon this principle tragi-comedy finds favour. Two questions will arise naturally from this.

First, if single, momentary actions are what chiefly please, why is not tragi-comedy as eligible a species of the drama as any other?

Secondly, for the same reason, why need we require, with the author of the *Pratique du Theatre*, any bounds to a tragedy, or say precisely, how many hundred lines\* it ought to consist of?

To the first question I answer, that the general interest of the piece is always an addition, and use may be made of this very disposition to variety. If, instead of a comic scene, songs are

\* A French tragedy is too long for an English audience; for whom *Æschylus's* plays are of a better length than those of *Sophocles* and *Euripides*.



introduced, the same tone of mind is preserved, to increase the interest, and that variety no less obtained.

To the second I answer, that though an audience does not fatigue its attention by listening to every word in a play, yet even stage tricks, exhibited by the same persons long, will want variety.

## LETTER X.

*Of the French Theatre.*

ITALY has undoubtedly the honour of reviving the regular tragedy in as perfect a manner, with respect to its mere form, as it appeared at Athens. And this would be an honour worthy of most countries, but is not of one that boasts such superior merit; Italy is a country, that in spite of the doctrine of the rights of man, and the new philosophy, has perpetually abounded with genius, and, what is extraordinary, still more under monks, than under senators. In some line or other, we everywhere see conspicuous characters rising round us, and are tempted to cry out with the wondering Sybil, "quo fessum rapitis, Fabii?"

The opinion Lopez de Vega had of the taste of Spain, which he was obliged to comply with, is known from himself. He tells us in a poem, that he is obliged to neglect Sophocles, Euripides, and Terence, in order to please bad judges, who ought justly to have, for their money,

what they prefer. But the drama was soon afterwards cultivated by the French, and an union of genius, with a remarkable sense of propriety, is discernible in their theatre. To them we owe the rule, that a drama ought, in strictness, to be confined to the time of representation; nor have a few of those rules, which sensibility of taste must approve, been traced by their critics. France is certainly one of the few countries that have gathered laurels in almost every part of literature, and though the children of Europe are ill trusted with the edge-tools of philosophy, yet, when directed properly, their efforts have been marked by a sensible increase in the genuine produce of dramatic labour. On the other hand; however just their rules, they have rated them too high, in making them the principal test of the merit of performances; and Dr. Johnson, though wrongly I conceive, arguing against them, yet does it in support of a good cause, by his defence of Shakspeare. Mrs. Montague had the merit, during the controversy between her and Voltaire, of observing the due medium; and while she did justice to correct composition, shewing as commendable a candour to the errors of genius. Dr. Warton



considers the usual rules of the drama in the same point of view, to judge from parts of his *Essay on the Genius of Pope*. His critique on Addison's *Cato*, remarks the fault of its unnecessarily exceeding the time of the representation. Without condemning French correctness, he observes, in allusion to the frequent boast of it by its advocates, "if it means, that, because their tragedians have avoided the irregularities of Shakspeare, and have observed a juster economy in their fables, therefore the *Athalie*, for instance, is preferable to *Lear*, the notion is groundless and absurd." An Englishman will not be slow to allow the superiority of *Lear* over *Athalie*, as a work of wit, and upon the whole; but in the single quality of taste, the other must be confessed to excel most dramas. It is not merely "an absence of petty faults," but an assemblage of great excellencies that pleases us in it; and it possesses in no small degree that spirited correctness, which peculiarly respects the feelings, not of the pedant, but the true scholar.

The faults of the French theatre, which are most noticed by us, and are common to them and the Greek tragedians, are an adoption of the de-

clamatory and narrative style. It is a style calculated in itself to shew great poetical powers, and accordingly in both the nations that have used it, we have to regret that such beauties are marked with any impropriety. It is, however, certain, that with respect to declamation, what we want is facts, not reasons; and that with respect to narration, what we require is actions, and not stories. But as to the peculiarity of the father of the French stage, namely his political style, considered separately from his declamatory; I mean to give my reasons why I do not think it a censurable peculiarity.

The ingenious critic last mentioned proceeds, according to the same way of thinking, to observe, "the rules of the drama, for instance, were never more completely understood than at present; yet what uninteresting, though faultless, tragedies, have we lately seen!" He then accounts for this fact, by supposing the systematic spirit so much in vogue, by consulting only reason, has destroyed sentiment. But it seems to me that the extreme irregularity which has been often exhibited on the stage, since that part of the essay was written, may sufficiently prove that it is not always

too much regard to reason that prevents excellence; it seems only to be accounted for by the rarity of a true turn for art in the artist, either alone, or accompanied by genius, and which is absolutely necessary to excel in any degree. Where this is wanting, we shall in vain advise authors either to observe, or reject rules. To advise their rejection seems the least proper; for, as there are some whose minds, after a mere sketch, grow tired of the work which has been employing them, so there may be others who are so animated by the idea of absolute perfection, that they never retouch without effect: but that candour which approves of faultlessness is surely preferable to that which is kind to error.



## LETTER XI.

*Of the English Stage.*

OUR school of dramatic painting appears, after making these reflections, not upon the whole to yield to any other, in spite of the superiority allowed, in some respects, to the cabinets of other countries. The sketches of our Salvator Rosa are in so high a style, that the more faithful imitation, the dramatic colouring of the French, has in vain been relied upon to discredit them. The fault of the French critics in their strictures upon Shakspeare, is like that of a connoisseur, who should condemn every drawing that was not coloured, and praise every one that was: but that of the English critics resembles the absurdity of one who should maintain, that grass and foliage were of the colour of Indian ink, and that this was capable of exhibiting all the varieties of nature. Dramatic painting too, like dramatic poetry, requires an extraordinary effort at preserving exactness of imitation; for a sketch is not out of place hung up in a room; but upon the stage, we

require that the scene should exhibit the most faithful copy of nature. On the other hand, the example of Corneille, followed by other poets, has introduced in France a good taste, as far as respects the observance of the unities; yet this acquiescing spirit in the audiences of Paris, has not preserved its due limits, but has unavoidably given encouragement to the peculiar faults of the French dramatists. Our audiences, on the contrary, indifferent as they are to the literary merit of a piece, and looking chiefly for the amusement of stage business and bustle, according to the manner which Shakspeare's example has established in England; yet by this liberty of thinking have essentially benefited the drama; of which nothing can be a greater proof than that our rivals, so proud of their dramatic writers of the age of Louis the Fourteenth, have not scrupled to copy us in speaking, in their tragedies, more to the eyes, and in rendering them less declamatory. Voltaire did this; for when he began to write, English literature was, by degrees, becoming known in France, and while he was in England he had an opportunity of closely examining our drama; which, though he had too mean an opinion

of, he with great judgment, took hints from, for the improvement of that of his own country. Whence then was this improvement ultimately derived? From the undissembled wants of a British audience—IT WAS OWING TO A BRITISH GALLERY.

Let us not therefore join in the usual outcry against the taste of the uninformed part of our audience. To their openness we are indebted for much knowledge of dramatic effect. It is an hopeless task often to give satisfaction to cold criticism, but the poet may much easier accommodate himself to the taste of unaffected and unbiassed ignorance. This more natural style of dramatic representation is therefore the contribution of our theatre to the art. We have also, as well as the French, produced two works of that sort in Mr. Mason's two poems, which I hold to be the most perfect sort of tragedy. An ingenious political writer\* compares the adherence to dramatic rule with the metaphysical spirit which has raged in France of late years, but surely the most bloodless experiment has the advantage, and,

\* Sir Brook Boothby's pamphlet.



though it may appear like regulating ourselves by abstract fitness, it must still be allowed that it is also *building upon old foundations*. In spite of the wonderful effort of the Greeks, in the invention of the drama, we have advanced in dramatic knowledge since their time, and it becomes us particularly to make use of it, for the production of new and more perfect works in this line. The strange imagination of French critics, that because our tragedies wanted regularity, we had less a theatre than they had, no longer obtains respect. But though our dramatic school of design in no wise yields to theirs, yet the art of dramatic colouring is not perfectly established among us; and it is always esteemed an act of patriotism, and deserving commendation, to introduce any art into a country. Accordingly, I have long wished that writers would attempt to supply this defect in our literature, till we should at length be possessed of a competent number of *acting* tragedies, not erring against those beautiful rules, the violation of which has subjected our theatre to criticism. This appears to me the great desideratum of English literature.

There has yet remained till now one defect in the chorus, which is, that the songs are often extemporaneous, and therefore less natural; and upon the whole, in estimating the progress, which is owing to us, in the dramatic art, we may come to this conclusion; that our experience has shewn stage-effect to be chiefly necessary to it, and we have drawn the inference, that *incorrectness* is supportable; but we have not drawn that equally just one, that *correctness* is so likewise.

## LETTER XII.

*Of the Battle of Eddington.*

WITH the idea of English tragedy, I have described in my last letter, I was induced to attempt the subject of the Battle of Eddington. Hume had lamented, that this pattern of kings who was engaged in it, had lived in so dark an age that history was not able to do justice to his merits. It, in consequence, occurred to me as incumbent upon Englishmen to remedy as much as possible, this defect, and make poetical description, which is in our power, a substitute for historical, which is not. I wished to see English dramatic writers vie with each other in representing this great man in every part of his life: according to these ideas therefore of tragedy in general, and of this subject in particular, I published the first edition of my play, but with too much impatience, and the more as at that time, in the year 1792, the subject of the English constitution engaged, in an unusual manner, the thoughts of the public. Nothing could have been more unfavourably received: the



monthly Reviewers observed, that "the subject, we are told, is mentioned by Milton; but in this author's hands it has not succeeded, and it is as unfit for the closet as the stage." This is, as far as I can recollect, their criticism. I will just here remark upon the general opinion, which seems to have regulated this criticism, of the exclusive aptitude for the closet of a regular play: the contrary has always seemed to me the case; but you will judge from this description of my feelings. When I go to see a regular play, the entrance of every character is already prepared by what precedes in the play; and I am never at a loss; but when a variation of the supposed time takes place, I am immediately puzzled, and am ignorant of the poet's new *hypothesis*, till I develope it by close attention. But when I read the same play, I find that information I wanted, however concisely expressed, at the head of every scene. A regular play, therefore, seems to have an equal advantage on the stage and in the closet; but an irregular play loses an advantage when represented.

I carried it to Covent Garden, saying that I would alter it for representation; but it was so evidently unfit to bring on, that it was returned to

me with a refusal, though the leaves had not been cut. It was also declined at Drury-lane. As I was zealous in the cause of regular tragedy, I had to choose whether I would alter a tragedy, the subject of which was so popular, or begin another, encountering greater labour, and running the risk of being less supported by the subject. I chose the former; and undertook those alterations, which were undoubtedly very necessary; but I did not see absolute reason to despair of their success, and hoped that, coming after such eminent writers, whose plays are not often acted, I might at least succeed, in the manner of that person who sent the notice to Hanover of Queen Anne's death, and valued himself upon doing what the great Mr. Addison was unable to do.

Mr. Mason did not mean to write for the stage, and had he done so, could not have written at that time with so much knowledge of the difficulty of pleasing, within the rules, as he could now, after the subsequent long experience of the necessity of studied stage-effect. If therefore his plays are not acted so frequently as their merit deserves, it cannot furnish an argument against this species of writing. From Mr. Mason's criti-

cism on Gray's *Agrippina*, and still more from his conversation with him, I know he would now use a very different method in writing for the stage.

Count Alfieri has of late years, with spirit, and with patriotism, avoided the servility of forming himself exclusively upon the style of either the French or English theatre, and aimed at excellence by uniting the broken impassioned utterance of the one, with the artificial arrangement of the other. The only thing to be regretted in the form of his tragedies, is the absence of the chorus ; for what a superior advantage would it derive from Italian singing ! It was about this time that I met with his tragedies, and fortunately with a criticism included in the work by Ranieri di Casabigi, from which I derived, I think, more useful information on the subject of dramatic effect, which I was now studying, than from any thing. This amusing treatise is at least marked with originality : its aim is to found a system of dramatic criticism upon that single precept of Horace, "*ut pictura poesis erit.*" Its merit, however, is all his own, and none owing to Horace. Living in the country which contains the finest productions of ancient and modern art, it was natural



that he should consider tragedy with the eye of a painter; and instead of speaking contemptuously, as the French critics have done, of that part of the drama which addresses itself to the sight, he considers it as the principal. He divides a tragedy of his friend's into what he calls a series of pictures, and points out every impassioned group, as if he were descanting upon the works of an historical painter: this is the principal part of stage-effect; nor can we, I think, condemn it, without passing a similar sentence upon the art of Raphael.

I observed, not long afterwards, the effect of Mr. Murphy's regular play of the Rival Sisters, which though it exhibited the same scene through five acts, occasioned only a faint hiss at the beginning of the last, as if prejudice forced it unwillingly from a small part of the house. I frequently also saw a very slight change in the scenery, a continuation of blank verse, and of the serious style, through other plays, sufficiently content an audience: from which I concluded, that such outrageous violation of rule as is often practised is by no means necessary to please generally.

Mr. Pye's idea of the division of the drama into three acts, and his play so written, called the *Siege of Meaux*, pleased me, as I had already formed the same opinion, in reading Aristotle's *Poetics*, though I had accidentally ended my five acts with the five songs, thinking I might connect them with the music between the acts. I was induced by it, and also by a casual inspection of *Elfrida* and *Caractacus* as altered for the stage, to divide my play into three acts; as the irregular manner in which the songs appeared scattered over those plays, suggested to me the possibility of producing effect by the sudden, or varied introduction of music. I recollected also, that had Mr. Murphy's play before mentioned, been divided into three acts, it would have escaped the hiss.

In the course of the year 1792, Mr. Mason did me the favour of calling, and dining with me at Stoke. I mentioned to him the subject of Count Alfieri's tragedies; and he seemed to think, that if the same method were used, of omitting the chorus, there was more hope of the success of regular tragedy. It gave me pleasure, not long after, to have occasion to be of a different opinion; for going at that time frequently to the theatre, I

could not but observe the taste of the audience for what are called choruses ; and it immediately occurred that they might be easily grafted upon a tragedy of the ancient form, and that then an audience might suffer, indeed, the unities, but they would actually *admire* the chorus.

In observing the ingenious machinery exhibited in some pantomimes, and the great effect of gesture and emphasis; I grew almost to think, that a play as simple as the *Samson Agonistes*, if it failed, might owe its ill success either to the actors or the manager. But I was particularly struck with the effect of apt allusions in the language, and of moral and political remarks. Diderot and others, indeed, have condemned this source of dramatic pleasure, according to the usual affectation in French critics, of contempt for stage-effect; the want of which is so perceivable in their tragedies. I made use of this remark in many ways, but think I have most reason to value myself upon one in particular.

Though there are many who agree with me in approving of regular choral tragedies, yet I believe it is an universal opinion, that Corneille, in first introducing political scenes into the drama, was



not the inventor of any thing valuable, but justly incurred the blame of writing what was out of place, and that it might be said of such scenes, "nunc non erat his opus." My desire that justice should be done to so great a poet, increased the satisfaction I felt at making what I thought a curious discovery. My inference then, from the remark was as follows. I asked myself this question: if a number of scattered political remarks have the power each of them separately of gratifying an audience, why may they not all combine into a single scene, like those of Corneille? Might not the striking reflections of that author and of Lucan, please generally, if assisted by this pointed delivery of sentiments; and are not sentiments of this cast peculiarly fit to inculcate moral lessons, the best object of works of fiction? I therefore approved of the moderate use of this style of dramatic writing; and having adopted in one scene, without much idea of its being possible to defend it, I now altered that scene in the manner which it appeared might suit the taste of an audience; nor was any received with more applause, though it represented a serious debate

upon the principles of liberty, and the British constitution.

Was it a composition of another sort, and not a play I was to publish, I should have waited to improve the language in many instances ; but the great object was dramatic effect, and if this is allowed to be united with so much regularity, the labour, surely, may be deemed sufficient.

I venture to suppose you are of opinion, that the applause received was earned, as far as it could be, by pains taken to render a piece acceptable. Yet when it had been altered, it was a second time pronounced, at Covent Garden, unfit for representation. I next thought of taking, in the usual manner, the summer theatre for one night : but having applied, I found that a resolution had been lately entered into, owing to a disturbance on a similar occasion, of not permitting any piece to be acted there for the first time. This appeared to me a sad discouragement of the drama : I had found that it was the custom in country theatres, to act no plays but what had been performed in London ; and this resolution at once made poets completely dependant upon

the taste of managers, and prevented their being able to command an audience, circumstanced like those at regular theatres. Before this, provided there were no objectionable sentiments in a piece, the author could himself try the effect of it before such an audience; but afterwards it was impossible; and as a drama seems imperfect and unfit to be printed till it has been acted, there is, in truth, to him, no liberty of the press. If a remedy were sought for this, there may be enough at the present time to suggest that of destroying the monopoly; but let us consider if in this, as well as other things, sensible change is always necessary to improvement. Suppose that an author, on making a compensation to managers for the thinness of their houses, according to an average agreed upon, could always hire and open a theatre, for one, two, or three nights, or till they allowed the play had had a full and fair trial. This could not be said to affect private property; and if a drama was condemned, it would, like other literary works, be condemned by the public at large, and not by a few people whose judgments are as fallible as those of other men. Being determined, if possible, to have mine fairly before the public, at



a London theatre, I found no other ready means, except by applying to Captain Wathen, the owner of the Richmond theatre; thinking that perhaps he might be willing to dispense with any prevailing custom, of refusing to permit plays to be first acted there. He very politely and readily gave his consent; and my point was consequently gained, of removing the objection to my play at the Haymarket theatre.

When it was bringing on at Richmond, however, I had before promised myself success from the chorus; I now dreaded so strong a resemblance of the ancient manner, and I did not venture to bring on any musician except an harper and a singer, who were not accompanied by the orchestra. I found, however, fortunately, that the play gave general satisfaction, though the music displeased; and from this very reason, according to my former opinion, that it was different from the usual style. And when it was afterwards acted in town, the satisfaction given (as the music was encored,) justified my intention both of hazarding it upon the theatre, and doing so in that very way I had originally wished.

The monthly Reviewers, who had condemned

my play to *line trunks*, as fit neither for the stage nor the closet, may possibly be surprised that, instead of altering it gradually to their taste, and at last obtaining perhaps their approbation of it, as *tolerable for a classical play*, I should, before the second edition, have appealed to, and experienced favour from, a *London gallery*. They will learn that a classical play, though formed upon rules stricter than those of Aristotle's (where the time of the action only equals that of the representation,) may be so calculated to give satisfaction, that a critic cannot reckon every author as sure of condemnation, who preserves the unities; but that, without more caution, the harm may be superior to the good they do, by leading readers into error, whose taste they undertake to guide.

You will have observed, that I change the scene partially, without changing the place, after the example I have alluded to. You may also take notice of my adoption of the French method of numbering the scenes, and of indicating at the beginning of each the persons present. The former may have its use, in a critical reference to any particular scenes; and the latter, besides

its use, is, I think in print, beautifully characteristic of the drama, when the names are printed in capitals. Its use is, that the eye may immediately glance to the page containing the names, and as much as possible, render our conception of a play read, as lively as that of a play acted. For the same reason, I thought every marginal explanation necessary, and have adhered to the English custom of particularizing the exits and entrances. The mode of numbering the lines, as in the Greek tragedies, might be useful, where copious notes are subjoined to a standard author; for it furnishes a more precise reference; but otherwise, the page may be sufficient.

THE END.